PERSECUTION FOR CONSCIENCE CONDEMNED,

K. 4106. k. 8

By the { *Light of Nature.* / *Law of God.* / *Evidence of our own Principles.*

Jam. 2. 12.

So speak you, and so do, as they that are judged by the Law of Liberty, for they shall be judged without Mercy, that have shewed no Mercy.

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PERSECUTION
FOR
CONSCIENCE
CONDEMNED:

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PERSECUTION FOR CONSCIENCE, &c.

HAving met lately with a Book Entituled (*Compulsion of Conscience Condemned*) so much stuffed with Digressions, which gives an Umbrage to the Scope of the Matter, and renders it tedious to the Reader, moved me to set down these sentiments in short, for the better Proof of the argument upon so material a Subject, not wronging the Original, nor reflecting upon any particular perswasion, but for the the general good of all, Which is as followeth.

Since we have so happily shaken of that intollerable Yoke of Popish Infallibility (which neither we nor our forefathers were able to bear) it is become to us not only Tyrannical, but Absurd, to compel others to a way, that our selves confess, may possibly be erroneous.

If any opinion be probably true, persecution in that case is certainly unlawful, because otherwise both sides, for both are probable, if one be, might justifiably persecute one another, to the utter destruction of all Society.

We see one Parliament repeals those Articles of Faith, which a former Enacted, that form of Worship which the Laws had introduced in after times was generally exploded, and since that a Reformation Sealed with so solemn a Covenant, and carried on with so furious a zeal, was soon discovered to better lights to be merely human, and therefore deservedly laid aside, how prepostrous is it then to constrain a soul not only to forsake his conscience, which may be truth, but drive him contrary to his own heart, to a way that may be errour.

Since the Word of God is the sole Rule of Faith, and no human Authority so highly impowred, as to bind up our assents to whatsoever Interpretation it shall please to propose: It clear-

ly follows, that as all the Children of God have equal Intereſt in the Teſtament of their Father; ſo no one amongſt them has any right to impoſe or force upon the Judgment of his Brother, one holds Baptiſm of Children to be neceſſary; another eſteems it unlawful; a third denys both theſe Opinions, admitting well that it may, but not that it muſt be done: They confer Texts, look into Original Tongues, pray inceſſantly to God, and profeſs ſolemnly the ſincerity of their intention; yet after all their dilligences and Devotions, ſtedfaſtly remain in their former perſwaſion; truly for my part he that ſhould adviſe Perſecution in ſuch a Caſe (unleſs his Fire brought Light too with it to demonſtrate the Truth) would ſcarce ſatisfie my ſuſpition, that his Coals were fetcht from the Infernal Pit.

If we reflect upon the Difficulties that encounter us in the way to truth, *for ſtrait is the Gate, and narrow is the Path*, and withal conſider the ſhortneſs of our ſight, for here we ſee but in part, and underſtand but in part: There will appear more reaſon to endeavour the mutual Aſſiſtance and ſupport, than malicious ruine and deſtruction one of another.

However ſince all have neither equal depth of Natural Judgment, nor the ſame meaſure of ſupernatural Illumination, but the Spirit bloweth how and where it pleaſeth, we ought not to attempt ſo high a preſumption, as to deſpiſe or perſecute our Brother for his innocent and blameleſs miſtakes, leſt we be found to fight againſt God, who is the free Diſpoſer of his Gifts; we know *the way of man is not in himſelf*, Jer. 10. 23. but *his ſteps are ruled by the Lord*, Prov. 20. 24. Therefore certainly did we bear a due reſpect to God, we would be content to wait his Leiſure, who have ingaged himſelf by his Apoſtle, *Phil.* 3. 15. *If any man be otherwiſe minded, God ſhall in time reveal even this unto him*; Let us therefore entertain ſuch an one, who proceeds in the ſimplicity of his heart with Milk, till he grow ſtronger to digeſt ſtrong Meat.

All Compulſion upon the Conſcience returns us flatly to our old Slavery under the *Prelats*, nay more to the implicite Faith of the *Papiſts*, with this only difference, that we are worſe than either, becauſe our Conſciences accuſe us of doing that which we condemn in others; for whatſoever I am convinced of, proceeds from as great a Tyranny as the High Commiſſion and is as blind an Aſſent, as can be matched in the groſſeſt Popery,

pery, and dare we think that doing the ſame things we judge in others, we ſhall eſcape the Judgment of God, *Rom.* 2.3.

Force is punishment and conſequently not juſt, unleſs the offence be voluntary; but he that believes according to the Evidence of his own reaſon, is neceſſitated to that belief, and to compell him againſt it, were to drive him to renounce the moſt eſſential part of Man, his Reaſon? Why ſhould we be commanded to try the Spirits, 1 *John* 4 1. *To prove all Things*, 1 *Theſſ.* 5. 21. If there be not a Faculty in the Soul to judge for her ſelf, why are we enjoyned to *hold faſt that which we find to be beſt*, if after our moſt ſerious and deliberate Election we ſhall be whipt out of our *Conſcience* by penalties; to what purpoſe do we preach poor Souls into juſt ſo much Liberty of Scripture as may beget their Tortures, and not permit them to reſt, where they find ſatisfaction either prohibite to ſearch at all, or leave us ſenſible of ſome benefit by teaching to believe what appears untrue, ſeems to me impoſſible, to profeſs what we believe untrue, I am ſure is damnable?

As it is certain, whoſoever ſwerves from the Dictate of his Conſcience commits a grievous Sin, *Rom.* 14. ſo without queſtion they that endeavour by force or artifice to draw any Man to profeſs or act contrary to what his Soul believes are as deeply guilty of the ſame crime: *When you wound the weak Conſciences of your Brethren you ſin againſt Chriſt*, 1 Cor. 8. 12. how dangerouſly then do they expoſe themſelves to the juſt Indignation of God who by Oaths, Impriſonments, Forfeitures, *&c.* both drive others and fall themſelves into eternal perdition; how deſperately do they attempt to extinguiſh the Light of Nature, which indiſpenſably obliges all men to deal with others, as they would be dealt with themſelves, a Light placed by God in clear and candid Souls to ſhine and guide them, but in the black ones to condemn and burn them: I ſhall cloſe this Diſcourſe with the Advice of the Apoſtle, *Rom.* 14. 13. *Let us therefore uſe our judgment rather in this, that no man put a ſtumbling block before his Brother.*

In this my ſecond part *I* will ſet down unanſwerable Texts of Scripture againſt the ill practice of Coercency in Religion.

Nor are theſe ſo excellent and important Truths built only upon the firm Foundation of ſolid Reaſon, but alſo upon the Infallible Authority of evident Scripture, 2 *Tim.* 2. 24. The ſervant of the Lord muſt not ſtrive, but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach forbearing, in Meekneſs inſtructing thoſe that are contrary minded, if God peradventure will give them repentance, to the acknowledging of the Truth, that they may convert themſelves out of the ſnare of the Devil, who are taken *Captive* by him at his Will: And another Apoſtle forbidding us to condemn one another, ſaith *Jam.* 4. 12. *There is one Lawgiver, who is able to ſave and to deſtroy, who art thou that judgeſt another Servant, to his own Maſter he ſtandeth or falleth, yea he ſhall be holden up; for God is able to make him ſtand, one Man eſteemeth one day above another, another eſteemeth every day alike*; Let every man be fully perſwaded in his own mind, haſt thou Faith, have it to thy ſelf before God, happy is he that condemneth not himſelf in that which he alloweth, that is, whoſe *Conſcience* inwardly accuſeth not his outward Profeſſion: The ſame moſt zealous of the Goſpel returns ſo condeſcending and moderate an Anſwer to a *Caſe* of a far harder ſound than we undertake to maintain, that it ſufficiently proves, he took his gentle Pen from the ſoft wing of the Dove, 1 *Cor.* 7. 12. If any Brother hath a Wife that believeth not, and ſhe be pleaſed to dwell with him, let him not put her away, and the Woman that hath a Husband that believeth not, and he be pleaſed to dwell with her, let her not leave him, but if the unbelieving depart, let him depart, a Brother or a Siſter is not in Bondage in ſuch *Caſes*, but God hath called us to peace, for what knoweſt thou O Wife, whether thou ſhalt ſave thy Husband, and what knoweſt thou O man, whether thou ſhalt ſave thy Wife; as God hath diſtributed to every Man, as the Lord hath called every one ſo let him walk, and ſo Ordain I in all *Churches*:

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What can be ſaid more efficaciouſly to oblige *Chriſtians* in charity and meekneſs to forbear one another, than ſo expreſs an Injunction of ſo great an Apoſtle, to live peaceably even with an Infidel, and again, 2 *Cor.* 1. 24. he denys that even the Apoſtles themſelves have any Soveraignty over the *Conſcience*, but only *Commiſſions* to aſſiſt the *Conſcientious*, not that we have (ſays he to the *Corinthians*) Dominion over your Faith, but are helpers of your Joy, therein exactly obſerving the Orders which *Chriſt* gave to his Apoſtles, *Go and Teach*, not *Compel, and if any one receive you not ſhake off the Duſt of your Feet*, not *trample upon them*, as duſt under feet, *Mat.* 10 14. conſtant to which Doctrine of Meekneſs our Saviour thus inſtructs his Diſciples, *Mat.* 23. 9. *Be not called Rabbi* (that is Maſters in ſpiritual matters) *for one it your Father, even Chriſt, and all you are Brethren.* To this belongs the patient forbearing the Tares, and letting them grow together with the Wheat, till the time of Harveſt, as alſo that admirable preſident of mildneſs towards the *Samaritans*, who refuſed to receive even Chriſt himſelf, whereupon the Diſciples *James* and *John* would immediately command fire from Heaven to conſume them, as in the days of *Elias*, but our merciful Lord rebuked their zeal, with this ſweet and tender reply, you know not what manner of Spirit you are of, *The ſon of man is not come to deſtroy mens lives, but to ſave them*, *Luke* 9. 54. which one example abundantly ſatisfies all objections drawn from the practice of *Elias*, *Jehu* the Sons of *Levi*, &c. in the old Teſtament for us, they had an expreſs command from God to warrant their zeal, we have an expreſs Warrant from Chriſt to command us Meekneſs. If any one ſhall ſhuffle in a ſuſpition, that this moderate temper was meant only for the times of perſecution, when the Chriſtians had no temporal power, let him firſt confeſs that thoſe were the beſt and pureſt times, and then ſhew a Warrant dormant under our Saviours hand (that is in his Goſpel) to commiſſionate his Diſciples, as ſoon as they ſhould get the ſword into their hands, to cut the Throats of all diſſobeyers and I ſubmit, but if they can cite no ſuch Authority, let them freely acknowledge that *Perſecution for Conſcience* is an unwarrantable Tyranny over the juſt Priviledges and Liberty of a Chriſtian.

As for the truth and power of Religion, it being a thing intrinsical between God and the Soul, and the matters of Faith in the Gospel being such as no natural light doth reach unto, we conceive there is no human power of Coertion thereunto, nor to restrain men from believing what God suffers their judgments to be perswaded off, for it is the Office of him who is the Lord of Conscience, to lighten and change mens minds, when and how he pleaseth, *Phil.* 3 15. *Let us therefore as many as be perfect be thus minded, and if in any thing you be otherwise minded, God shall reveal this unto you*, by inciting another by like forcible means, to Will and to Act against his conscience, and much more by Imprisonment, Mults, Terrours or Threats, *Rom.* 14. 15, 20, 21. *For this is to make him destroy his Soul, Verse* 20, 23. We may not disturb the peace of mens Consciences, or make their hearts sad with our invectives, or Menacing them causelesly with terrours, from the Lord. *Ezek.* 13. 22. *Because with lies ye have made the hearts of the righteous sad, whom I have not made sad*, &c.

We would not have you assure to your selves, or attribute unto others, a power to Lord it over mens Faith and Consciences, especially when men walk obediently towards those that are in places of Rule and Authority, and live a Godly, Sober, Honest peaceable and unblameable life. If men will do wickedly and defend a liberty in Christ so to do, let them be liable to the sword of Justice for so doing, but far be it from us, so much as by example, to draw a weak Brother, a Saint, a Fellow Servant of the Lord, whom no Man can accuse, but for his differing judgments, to do any thing against conscience, whereby he should condemn himself, as the Apostle speaks, *Rom.* 14. How much more ought Governours to be tender and abstemious in the use of violent and coercive Means, to precipitate men into such perilous and destructive courses, all authority is given of God for mens welfare, and much more for the Preservation, and not the Destruction of the soul.

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By these considerations (I conceive) is clearly demonstrated, the freedom of a Christian soul in her commerse for Heaven, which since the merciful bounty of God, holds forth indifferently to all, the cruel covetousness of Man, ought not to obstruct to any, surely it is the worst of Monopolies to lay impositions upon the way of Paradise; Christ by his death removed the Angel, that chased from thence our first Parents, and shall any of us take the flaming Sword into our hands, to sheath it in the bowels of a poor *Pilgrim*, who with a sincere heart travels to the same Country, only because he goes not in our Company: *In my Fathers house are many Mansions* (says Christ) why may there not be as many paths that lead to them, if they that have no Law shall be judged without the Law, certainly they that unblamesably mistake the Law shall be tryed according to those Expositions which appeared unto them, to be the meaning of the Lawgiver (for the Sense is the Law, and not the Letter) especially having so gracious a Judge, who hath already declared by his Apostle, 2 *Cor.* 8. 12. and if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what a Man hath, and not according to what a Man hath not; wherefore let us not by a sudden violence break into pieces the Consciences of our Brethren, but mildly thaw them into a cordial and ingenuous Unity, that righteousness and peace may flow together in the same Channel, and not as broken Ice dash one against another, let us patiently expect, till the Lord be pleased to take off the Vail from their hearts that are otherwise minded, and not by forcing their Judgments add to their Vail of Ignorance a worser sort of Hypocrisie, it being now a common experiment that generally, the Issue of compulsionary and forced Conformity closes in this, to make some few counterfeit Protestants, and a great many real Atheists, whence it is clearly concluded, that the only true means of winning Souls to God, is the Gospel-like way of meekness and perswasion, and indeed it may worthily be esteemed the prime Miracle of Christianity, that a person so humble as our Savjour appeared, without the assistance of Kings and Princes, without the enchanting words of Mans Wisdom, without the affrighting threats of Fines, Imprisonments and Deaths (though all these were absolutely subject to his pleasure) should conquer Powers and Principalities, should outcharm the Magick of Human Eloquence, and by the admi-

rable Success of his Mildness, condemn all those politick Religions, that confess their own craziness by using cruelty to support them, whereas to reduce the disobedient only with the Spirit of Gentleness and Admonition, or at most desertion, argues indeed a Divinity in the Author and a purity in the Ordinance, and here we may fitly apply the words of our Lord, *John* 14.2. *If it had been otherwise, I would have told you*, if the means of preserving Religion had been by watering it with the blood of refusers to embrace it, rather than of those that sought to propagate it, I would have told you either by my example (all the world being in the power of my Deity) or by my Doctrine, all justifiable proceedings concerning the Government of my flock, being derived from the Warrant of my Word; thus we see our gracious Lawmaker, faithful and constant to his own Principles, the Son of man came not to destroy mens Lives, but to save them: Thus we see our own Duty to learn of him, for he is meek and humble of heart, let us not therefore judge one another any more, but use our Judgment rather in this, that no man put an occasion to fall, or a stumbling block before his Brother, *Rom.* 14.13. Let us always remember the Advertisement which the beloved Disciple gives to all his Fellow Servants of the Lord Christ, *John* 13 16. *The Servant is not greater than his Lord, if you know these things happy are you, if you do them.*

These few unpolisht Lines, which I here present for Incouragement of Tenderness, I desire may not be stretcht to draw in a wild and an extravagant Licentiousness, since they aim no farther than to hold up a Liberty to such only as profess Christ, and walk before the Lord in the Integrity of their heart, who by the following marks are easily discernible from all those that for their blasphemies in Doctrines, and Debauchery in manners are worthily excluded from the benefit of this *Indulgence*.

Supposing first, as confest by all understanding men, that Tenderness of Conscience is not the same thing with Truth of Judgment (else there could be but one only kind, because Truth is but one) but it signifies a proceeding *bona fide*, without sinister respects or dissimulation, seeking before all things to know God, and fearing above all things to offend him.

And secondly since in our *Inquiry* to whom belongs so honourable a Title, we cannot pierce into the inward thoughts of men, we must give Sentence as they appear to us, which rule in Cases

ſes of this quality is in it ſelf ſufficiently certain, however it is the only means God hath allowed for nature to guide her reſolutions in the judging of others.

The Signs then of tender Conſciences are theſe; if they lead regular, vertuous and peaceable Lives, if their Opinions be not juſtly accuſable of ſelf-intereſt or Licentiouſneſs, but rather require of them a prudent and religious ſeverity againſt the *Inclinations* of corrupted Nature, if their Judgments be ſteddy, not fanned to a new Senſe with every breath of wind, if they continue in the ſame perſwaſions at their death, which is no time for diſſembling, at leaſt we ought to judge ſo, if they not only die in their Faith, but for it, not only give away good part of their Eſtates charitably, but ſuffer all to be taken away patiently, and all this for Chriſts ſake, or (to ſpeak more cloſely) for that which they believe to be his Will and Commandment, no higher Teſtimony of a true and real Sincerity can poſſibly be given, or eaſily imagined, and whoſoever doubts after ſuch Evidence (chiefly if many concur in the ſame way) deſerves to be condemned, as the moſt paſſionate, malitious and uncharitable perſon in the World, for though one man may value his fancy above his Life or eſtate, yet it is very near an abſolute Impoſſibility, that many (eſpecially if they be diſcreet and rational in other Negotions) ſhould agree to undo themſelves for a meer conceit, did they not ſeriouſly believe it more imports them to keep their Faith, than loſe their Fortunes.

By theſe Rules we may eaſily conclude the admiſſion of thoſe pious and religious Perſons, who were impriſoned and perſecuted by the late *Prelates*, who into the number of tender Conſciences, as alſo thoſe precious Servants of the Lord, who by a voluntary baniſhment left their Friends and Country, to place the Liberty of the Goſpel amongſt the ſavage Heathens of *America*.

How are we degenerated from the primitive Believers, who would rather have given their own *Lives*, to perſwade their Enemies to Piety, than ſought to take away the *Lives* of their Brethren, to force them to Hypocriſie.

Which have been occaſioned by infringing the *Liberty* of *Conſcience*, by violent means to alter *Conſcientious* mens Judgments, and their preſent perſwaſion, which kind of ſeverity I fear may at laſt find the Truth of Gods Threatning, if you bite and devour.

your one another take heed you be not consumed one of another, *Gal.* 5. 15. Wherefore it shall be my daily Prayer to our great and good God, that he would graciously inspire the Governors of the Earth, his Servants, who now sit at the helm to prevent those heavy Judgments upon themselves, and seriously considering that both their Allegiance to reason, their Duty to God, their Ingagement to their own Principles, call so loudly upon them, that they would fulfil now our Joy, and compleat the good Work, by putting the tender *Conscienced* and peaceable minded people of this Nation into a *Condition* of perfect security for matters of *Religion*, which cannot be effected without a general Act of *Conscience-Indempnity*, for all that profess the Gospel of *Christ*.

For incouragement of which Holy design, out of the bowels of Mercy, I have endeavoured in this short Discourse to demonstrate, That Persecution of *Conscience* amongst *Christians*, is clearly repugnant to the *Light of Nature*, the *Law of God*, and the *Evidence of our own Principles*.

FINIS.